How Readers Rate Their Newspapers

Results From A National Survey

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AN UPDATE ON NEWSPAPER READERSHIP AND CONTENT

PREFACE

In October 1987, the Newspaper Advertising Bureau conducted the latest in a series of nationwide studies of newspaper readership and content. This study was sponsored by the Readership Task Force of the Future of Advertising Project. The field work for the survey, data processing, and tabulations were executed by the Response Analysis Corporation of Princeton, NJ. Interviewing was balanced across days of the week, Tuesdays-Saturdays; in all, interviews were completed with one adult member within a stratified probability sample of 2,049 households.

Two versions of the questionnaire were used in the interview to cover a wide range of topics, e.g., newspaper buying patterns; reading of daily newspapers and television viewing in three day parts; exposure to other news media; readers' content preferences and reading behavior (daily and Sunday); ratings of various dimensions of newspaper performance and utility; and detailed demographic information. Some of the items were repeated from earlier studies in order to monitor trends; others were developed to reflect new topics or issues of relevance to the newspaper business.

During the interview, readers of yesterday's daily newspaper were taken through a copy of it and asked about pages opened to and looked at from among a sample of six randomly selected spreads (12 pages). The sampled pages were coded for content and format, e.g., predominant editorial content or section, location in the paper, balance of editorial to ad content, presence of color, etc. Certain attributes of the newspaper read by each reader were also coded, e.g., circulation size, broadsheet or tabloid, publication cycle, number of pages, etc. The survey data have been weighted to take account of sampling design considerations and to adjust for variations in response among certain demographic segments of the adult population.

The results of this survey are presented in a series of reports, dealing with circulation, newspaper reading habits, ratings of the newspaper, the Sunday newspaper, newspapers as an advertising medium, and cable and VCR incidence and use. A separate technical report, prepared by Response Analysis, with details on sampling, field work, and weighting procedures as well as copies of the questionnaires used in the study, is also available.

The project was directed by Albert E. Gollin of the Bureau's Research Department. This report was prepared by Carolyn A. Eldred in collaboration with Albert E. Gollin. May Florez's assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

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HIGHLIGHTS

1. The daily newspaper earns generally favorable ratings for its coverage of a range of news topics. Among those rating each of nine news topics, all nine received "good" ratings from better than two out of three readers; six topics earned good ratings from four-fifths or more.

2. These ratings, when compared with those earned by newspaper coverage in a 1982 study, show essentially no change, despite changes in the size and composition of the reading public in the intervening years.

3. Readers' assessments of how well their newspapers perform on fifteen quality dimensions also show only a few areas of below average performance. Newspapers get high marks for appearance, organization, ease of reading, value for the money, the quality of their staff, and the watchdog role they play. Only in the area of fairness and keeping facts and opinion separate does a majority give their paper relatively lower ratings. These ratings appear unchanged from those given to many of the same items in a 1982 national study.

4. Perceptions of bias in news coverage arising from the newspaper's editorial slant were rejected by a near-majority of readers. Only about one reader in eight harbors the conviction that editorial opinions consistently affect news coverage. Correlatively, a majority feels that a wide range of opinions is made available on the op-ed pages, rather than just one viewpoint. Frequent readers are more positive in their attitudes about their newspaper's objectivity and balanced presentation.

5. Newspapers are not seen as advancing partisan political views, liberal or conservative, by a majority of readers. More view their paper's position as "middle of the road." And readers generally part company with their paper's editorial positions as often as they agree with them.

6. The paper is user friendly for most readers. Most find the news index or summary helpful (at least occasionally), and most immediately follow stories that "jump", in order to finish reading them.

7. All but two of a variety of potential uses and benefits applied (to some degree) to a majority of readers. The reason for reading applicable to the largest number was that the newspaper lets them follow up on news seen or heard elsewhere. The variety provided by its news and features was a prime reason for almost as many readers. Keeping up with news of various types and help in forming opinions and in shopping were other strong motivations. The use of the newspaper to pass the time, to help plan the day's activities, and to avoid feeling isolated were relatively less important to most readers.

8. Reliance on the newspaper to keep up with the news is further shown in answers to questions about eight specific topics, e.g., politics and elections, the economy, etc. More than seven in ten readers try to keep up with all of these topics; the newspaper is their leading source for local news. TV leads in six of the eight categories; newspapers also win out for their fashion/lifestyle coverage.

9. The benefits of newspapers (vs. TV) to readers when performing three roles in daily life were examined, and the newspaper clearly dominates TV as a source of useful consumer information. It also leads TV in helping readers plan leisure time activities, but is seen as less helpful than TV in their role as citizens or voters.

10. While nearly three readers in five admit to feeling under time pressure (especially those with children, or working women), many groups claiming to be relatively more pressed for time are among the newspaper's most loyal readers. "No time to read" is a reality for some segments, but lack of interest in the news probably plays a correlative role.

11. Preference for news rather than features continues to predominate in readers' judgments, though younger readers are much less news-oriented. Demographic differences on two measures of content preferences are substantial, reflecting a continuing process of segmentation of reader interests.

12. "Local news" is still the newspaper's prime franchise, but readers' definitions of it vary widely. Most adopt a "close-in" (neighborhood or city) geographic perspective when defining the category in their own words. But when forced to choose one that best fits, their definitions widen in scope to include the metro area and region, rather than retaining a narrower focus on neighborhood and city or town.

I. READERS RATE THEIR NEWSPAPER'S PERFORMANCE

Rating the Coverage of News Topics

Readers were asked to rate their newspaper's coverage of nine news topics. Better than four-fifths of readers who rated each topic say that their newspaper is doing a good job of covering five topics of local, national or international significance, as well as sports and crime news. Two-thirds or more say it provides good coverage of the other four specialized news topics. Relatively lower ratings were given to coverage of pollution problems, neighborhood news and minority group news.[1] (See Table 1)

The smallest papers earn only slightly higher marks for their local government coverage, while the largest papers earn higher ratings for coverage of minority group news and world news. Frequent readers[2] rate their papers' coverage slightly more favorably than do infrequent

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[1]Version A: "Please tell me how a good a job the newspaper you read most often does in helping to keep you informed." (Topics: what the President and Congress are doing; things that happen in the neighborhood; what's going on in other countries; what local government is doing; sports events or sports news; crimes and robberies; the AIDS epidemic; what's happening among minority groups; and environmental pollution problems.)

[2]Those reading a daily newspaper four or all five days in the preceding week.

Table 1

Readers' Ratings of Newspaper Coverage of Nine News Topics
(Percent Saying "Good")*

	Sports	President/ Congress	Crime	World News	Local Gov't.
Total readers**	89%	88%	88%	83%	83%
By reading frequency					
Frequent readers	89%	89%	90%	85%	86%
Infrequent readers	90	87	85	81	80
By age					
18 - 24	88%	88%	83%	81%	86%
25 - 29	93	95	88	92	87
30 - 34	97	86	92	77	83
35 - 44	89	87	87	79	84
45 - 54	95	88	85	81	81
55 - 64	81	87	91	88	78
65 +	85	87	90	86	84
By education					
Not High School graduate	89%	82%	88%	90%	82%
High School graduate	91	90	88	85	84
Some college	92	89	84	82	83
College graduate +	83	88	92	76	84
By circulation size					
Less than 25,000	88%	87%	87%	73%	89%
25 - 50,000	96	88	93	85	86
50 - 100,000	99	90	93	83	86
100 - 250,000	89	90	85	89	83
250,000 or more	87	93	90	88	82
By region					
Northeast	90%	89%	89%	81%	83%
North Central	88	89	89	88	85
South	93	88	87	85	85
West	84	86	87	76	79

Table 1 (Continued)

Readers' Ratings of Newspaper Coverage of Nine News Topics
(Percent Saying "Good")*

	AIDS	Pollution	Neighborhood	Minority Groups
Total readers**	80%	72%	68%	69%
By reading frequency				
Frequent readers	85%	76%	68%	73%
Infrequent readers	73	65	68	63
By age				
18 - 24	67%	59%	79%	59%
25 - 29	82	62	68	72
30 - 34	73	63	68	55
35 - 44	83	67	62	63
45 - 54	86	79	67	75
55 - 64	74	80	62	72
65 +	87	83	73	81
By education				
Not High School graduate	83%	74%	71%	74%
High School graduate	80	72	73	66
Some college	79	65	67	65
College graduate +	79	78	57	72
By circulation size				
25,000 or less	83%	71%	78%	58%
25 - 50,000	75	77	80	72
50 - 100,000	84	69	73	66
100 - 250,000	85	77	66	74
250,000 or more	80	69	53	73
By region				
Northeast	76%	75%	68%	70%
North Central	83	72	67	63
South	80	70	75	75
West	81	69	58	63

*The proportions reported here combine ratings of "very good" and "fairly good." (Other ratings were "not too good" and "not good at all.")

**Based only on readers able to rate their newspaper on each of these news topics.

readers. Older readers rate their newspapers higher for their coverage of minority groups and pollution. The better educated are, however, somewhat less positive about their newspaper's coverage of world news. But in general, ratings do not vary systematically among demographic groups.

The inability of some readers to rate their paper's coverage of these topics reflects both a low involvement with their paper and more variable interest in certain news topics. For five topics (news of president/congress, neighborhood news, world news, local government, and crime news), the proportion of readers who couldn't rate their newspapers is in the range of 9% to 11%. For the remaining, more specialized topics, the figures are higher: AIDS (15%), pollution (17%), minority groups (22%), and sports (27%). Interest in the subject matter is also important, as illustrated by the differing proportions of women and men (35% vs. 18%) who are unable to rate their papers' sports coverage. Similarly, whites have more difficulty than blacks in rating the paper's coverage of minority groups (23% vs. 13%) and AIDS (16% vs. 9%), while more blacks than whites are unable to rate their paper on its coverage of pollution problems (24% vs. 16%).

Seven of the items used to appraise the quality of newspapers' topical news coverage in this study were repeated from a national readership study done in 1982.[1] A comparison of the average scores given by readers across the five year period shows practically no change, item by item, and only minor shifts in the relative positions of the topics rated. And

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[1]See Readers Rate Their Daily Newspaper (Newspaper Advertising Bureau, 1986), pp. 45-47.

while in both surveys some reader groups appear to be more enthusiastic than others about the way their newspapers are covering these news topics, on the whole the ratings are not consistently related to demographic differences. Neighborhood news and news about pollution problems continue to be areas in which daily newspapers get relatively lower marks. (See Table 2)

Table 2

Readers' Ratings of Newspaper Coverage of
Selected News Topics, 1987 vs. 1982
(Mean Scores: Scale 1 - 4)*

	1987	1982
Sports events, news	1.6	1.6
What President/Congress are doing	1.8	1.9**
Crimes and robberies	1.8	1.7
What local government is doing	1.9	1.9
What's going on in other countries	1.9	1.9
Pollution problems	2.1	2.3
Things that happen in the neighborhood	2.2	2.3

*Scores: 1=Very Good 2=Fairly Good 3=Not Too Good 4=Not Good At All

**1982 wording: "What President Reagan is doing."

Rating Newspaper Performance and Presentation Quality

When asked about fifteen aspects of newspaper performance[1] that cut across topical areas, readers give their paper high scores[2] on such

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[1]One half of the readers in the sample were asked about nine criteria (in Version A): "How would you rate the newspaper [you read most often] in terms of _____? The other half were asked about the rest (in Version B): "What kind of job do you think the newspaper you read most often is doing on _____?" The same rating scale was used, where "1" was extremely poor and "9" was excellent.

[2]A "high" score is defined as a score of 7, 8, or 9 on a nine-point scale, ranging from 1 (extremely poor) to 9 (excellent).

format-related aspects as readability, organization, and appearance (around 75% rating them highly), and lowest on fairness or impartiality (less than 50% giving high ratings). But very few gave ratings on any of these nine indicators that fell below a midpoint score of "5". Frequent readers have a consistently more positive view of their paper's performance and presentation quality than do infrequent readers. (See Table 3.)

The nine measures of newspaper performance used in Version A of the questionnaire were drawn from a study done in 1982 for the Newspaper Readership Project. When the ratings in these two studies (separated by five years) are compared, almost no changes can be seen either in the average ratings or in their rank order. (See Table 4) Those who read the newspaper, no matter how often, show quite consistent judgments about what their papers are doing well or less well. The stability in these aggregate ratings holds across most demographic groups. Variations in ratings given to newspapers in different circulation size groups or regions of the country exist, but these are minor in most cases. The overriding impression that these results convey is of a high degree of reader consensus when rating the performance and presentation quality of their newspaper.

To examine the variables important to readers' overall assessments of their newspapers, readers were categorized into three groups based on whether they gave their paper high scores on most, some, or only a few of the performance criteria they were asked to rate.

Table 3

Readers' Ratings of Their Newspaper on Fifteen Performance Indicators
(Percent Giving "High" Scores of 7-9: Scale 1-9))

	All Readers	Frequent Readers	Infrequent Readers
Using a size of print that is easy to read#	78%	81%	77%
Organizing the paper so you can find what you want#	78	83	69
How readable & understandable it is*	75	80	69
How good it looks*	67	72	62
The kind of value it gives its readers for the money*	68	70	66
The quality of the people who work for it*	67	68	66
How good a job it does in bringing to light things the public ought to know about*	66	68	61
Covering local news stories you don't see on TV#	63	64	61
How accurately it presents the news*	61	64	59
How interestingly it is written*	61	65	57
Making sure that the paper isn't boring to read#	58	61	55
Using photos, maps, & charts that make the news easier to understand#	58	61	54
How genuinely interested the paper is in this community*	57	61	53
Separating facts from opinions#	45	47	43
How fair or impartial it is to all sides*	44	46	38

* From Version A (those able to rate each item)
# from Version B (those able to rate each item)

Table 4

Readers' Ratings of Newspaper Performance, 1987 vs. 1982
(Mean Scores: Scale 1-9)

	1987	1982*
How readable and understandable	7.4	7.4
The value it gives for the money	7.1	7.0
How good it looks	7.0	7.1
Quality of people who work for it	7.0	7.0
Bringing to light what public ought to know	6.9	7.0
How accurately it presents the news	6.7	6.8
How interestingly written	6.8	6.9
How genuinely interested in this community	6.5	6.5
How fair or impartial to all sides	6.0	6.1

*See Readers Rate Their Daily Newspaper (Newspaper Advertising Bureau, 1986), page 50.

Although half of the readers were queried about two different sets (Versions A and B) of performance criteria, the distribution of readers by the answers they gave to items covered in both versions is highly similar. Just over 40% give their newspaper high ratings on more than two-thirds of the items, and only one-fourth give it high ratings on one-third or fewer of the indicators or performance criteria. Frequent readers rate their paper more favorably than infrequent readers, even though some of the demographic groups disproportionately represented in the former, e.g. men and those with better education, tend to be somewhat more critical of their newspaper. (See Table 5)

Table 5

Proportion of Readers Rating Their Newspapers Highly on Most, Some or a Few Performance Indicators*
(High Scores = 7-9: Scale 1-9)

	Most	Some	Few
VERSION A (Nine Indicators)			
Total readers	42%	32%	27%
By reading frequency			
Frequent readers	45	33	23
Infrequent readers	37	31	32
By sex			
Men	37	35	29
Women	46	29	25
By education			
Not High School graduate	44	35	22
High School graduate	42	33	26
Some college	41	31	28
College graduate	42	28	29
VERSION B (Six Indicators)			
Total readers	43%	30%	27%
By reading frequency			
Frequent readers	45	31	24
Infrequent readers	40	29	31
By sex			
Men	38	31	31
Women	47	30	23
By education			
Not High School graduate	50	26	24
High School graduate	45	27	28
Some college	38	35	28
College graduate	36	37	27

*Note: Version A contained nine performance indicators. Readers who gave high scores (ratings of 7 - 9) on 7, 8, or all 9 indicators are categorized as "Most" in this table. "Some" = high scores on 4, 5, or 6; "Few" = high scores on 0, 1, 2, or 3 indicators. Version B contained six performance indicators. Readers giving high scores on 5 or all 6 are categorized as "Most"; "Some" = high scores on 3 or 4; "Few" = high scores on 0, 1, or 2 indicators.

Editorial Performance: Biased or Balanced Presentation?

Readers were asked about a number of sensitive issues of editorial image and performance. These include the spillover influence of editorial views on news coverage, variety or imbalance in op-ed articles and columns, the newspaper's political slant, and readers' agreement with their paper's editorial positions.

Do editorial views affect the way the news is covered and presented? Among readers, 48% felt that the newspaper they read most often kept news and opinion separate, 20% felt that the paper's viewpoint does affect the way the news is covered, and 10% held a mixed viewpoint, (i.e., it happens on some issues). Roughly one-fifth (21%) weren't able to give a judgment on this matter. Little change is seen when these responses are compared to those registered in a 1982 study.

The proportions holding the two most sharply contrasting views on news bias do not vary appreciably among different reader groups. (See Table 6) Readers of the smallest and largest newspapers tend to be relatively more critical of their papers in this regard. Frequent readers, those best able to have formed an opinion by virtue of their greater exposure, were somewhat more likely than occasional readers (or the average reader) to see news and opinion kept separate in their paper. But as nearly one-third (30%) of infrequent readers had no opinion on this matter, some of the difference clearly reflects the higher degree of conviction that goes with greater familiarity.

Table 6

Readers' Judgment About Editorial Bias* and Balanced Presentation**

	Opinions Separate From News	Opinions Affect News Coverage	Op-ed Columns/Articles: Wide Range	Op-ed Columns/Articles: One View
Total Readers (Version A)	48%	20%	53%	22%
Age				
Under 35	46%	21%	47%	21%
35+	49	19	56	22
Sex				
Men	47%	20%	53%	21%
Women	49	20	52	22
Race				
White	49%	21%	55%	21%
Black	48	14	44	27
Circulation Size				
Under 25K	52%	22%	55%	26%
25-50K	55	19	61	20
50-100K	45	18	47	24
100-250K	51	19	52	23
250,000K	40	24	53	21
Reading Frequency				
Frequent Readers	53%	20%	62%	20%
Infrequent Readers	41	19	41	24

Questions: (Version A)

*"In your judgment, does the newspaper you read most often keep its editorial opinion separate from the news stories it covers, or do its editorial opinions affect the way it reports the news?"

**"How about regular columns or other signed articles close to or on the editorial page of the paper? Do you think they represent a wide range of opinions, or do they mostly reflect just one basic viewpoint?"

Even among the minority (30% of all readers) who see a breach in the wall that is meant to separate news from editorial views, fewer than half believe that the spillover occurs either "all" (10%) or "a lot of the time (35%)." Thus, at most, about one reader in eight expresses strong suspicions about a consistent display of objectivity in the way their paper handles the news. And this core of readers isn't concentrated in any demographic group or region or exposed to newspapers of any specific type.

In a related vein, a majority (53%) of readers acknowledged that their newspaper printed a "wide range of opinions" on their op-ed pages, and only 22% saw them as representing "only one basic viewpoint." (Fully one-quarter couldn't judge or had no opinion.) And as with the question on editorial bias, differences in the balance of views among various reader groups were neither large nor consistent. (See Table 6) Most of the difference had mainly to do with an ability or willingness to express opinions on this issue. This is most obvious in the differences shown between frequent and infrequent readers: the former group is both more affirmative about expressing an opinion <u>and</u> more likely to say their newspaper gives them access to a wide range of views.

<u>Editorial Partisanship and Readers' Agreement</u>

By and large, few readers judge their paper as having either a consistently liberal or conservative orientation. A plurality (43%) perceives their newspaper's political orientation as middle-of-the-road, and the remainder are fairly evenly divided among those who see a liberal

orientation (14%), those who see a conservative orientation (22%), and those who can't define its political orientation (18%). Readers' perceptions can be affected not only by the paper's editorial policy but also by their own political stance and familiarity with the newspaper. As shown in Table 7, big city newspapers are more likely to be characterized as liberal than are others. Most differences, however, are minor, mainly reflecting a readiness to respond at all categorically.

Overall, most readers do not consistently agree or disagree with their newspaper's editorial positions. A sizable plurality (46%) of readers (52% of frequent readers) is evenly divided with respect to their newspaper's editorial positions, while equal proportions generally agree (16%) or mostly disagree (16%) with them. (The rest couldn't answer.) Again, the role of familiarity with the paper is important: frequent readers are much more likely to be able to answer, and the proportion who "can't say" drops substantially with increasing age -- from 32% in the 18-29 year age group to 11% among those age 55 or older.

Finding Their Way Through the Paper

For most readers the newspaper is "user friendly." The vast majority (87%) agree it's "pretty easy" to find the things that interest them in the daily newspaper. Only 4% say that it takes some work, and 2%

Table 7

Readers' Perceptions of and Agreement with
Their Newspaper's Political Orientation

	Political Orientation:			Agreement with Editorial Views:		
	Mostly Liberal	Mostly Conser-vative	Middle-of the Road	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Evenly Divided
Total readers (Version B)	14%	22%	43%	16%	16%	46%
By reading frequency						
Frequent readers	15%	26%	45%	18%	18%	52%
Infrequent readers	13	18	40	13	13	37
By age						
18 - 24	14%	23%	37%	12%	19%	38%
25 - 29	9	28	42	13	11	40
30 - 34	16	20	45	14	14	45
35 - 44	14	22	40	16	17	47
45 - 54	10	28	41	9	15	57
55 - 64	16	23	50	27	15	45
65+	20	15	45	20	18	48
By sex						
Men	16%	25%	43%	14%	19%	47%
Women	12	20	42	17	13	45
By race						
White	14%	22%	43%	15%	16%	47%
Black	13	27	45	23	17	32
By education						
Not High School graduate	19%	14%	43%	19%	15%	43%
High School graduate	11	21	42	15	13	49
Some college	13	23	46	16	21	41
College graduate	17	32	37	16	16	47
By circulation						
Less than 25,000	9%	26%	46%	13%	12%	57%
25 - 50,000	10	21	48	27	14	41
50 - 100,000	14	30	37	15	15	52
100 - 250,000	13	20	43	16	18	41
250,000 or more	22	20	41	10	19	47

Questions: "How would you describe the political views of the newspaper you read most often -- would you say it is mostly liberal, conservative or middle-of-the-road?"

"Would you say you mostly agree with the editorial positions taken by that newspaper, or disagree more often than you agree, or are your views about evenly divided?"

say that it takes a lot of work.[1] Not surprisingly, frequent readers have an easier time than infrequent readers: 91% (vs. 82%) said it's pretty easy. In addition, ease in navigating their way through the newspaper increases with age. The effects of greater familiarity are evident in both of these findings.

In recent years, many newspapers have added news summaries and indexes to help readers save time and ease the task of finding what interests them. Fully four readers in five (80%) said their daily newspaper has this reader feature. Most of them find the paper's index or summary of news and features helpful: 28% use it regularly, and 39% use it occasionally; one-third doesn't use it at all.[2] The oldest (78%) and the youngest (82%) readers are the two groups most likely to find it useful.

A long-standing debate in editorial circles concerns the wisdom of using "jumps" to allow more space to expand stories printed on the front page. Some believe that readers will lose interest in longer stories, especially if it involves extra effort in handling the newspaper. The

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[1](Version A): "When it comes to finding the things that interest you the most in the daily paper, would you say that it's pretty easy, that it takes some work, or that it takes a lot of work to find them?"

[2](Version A): "Many newspapers have an index or summary of news and features in each day's paper to help the readers find things that are of interest to them. Does your daily paper contain a news index or summary? "Do you use this index regularly, do you use it occasionally, or don't you make use of the index?"

evidence from this survey is that when stories are jumped from the front page to another page or section of the paper, nearly three-fourths of readers (73%) say that they immediately turn to that page and keep reading it. Another 16% read the continuation segment when they come to it, while only 5% do not usually read the rest of the story[1]. Frequent readers are somewhat more likely than infrequent readers to turn immediately to the continuation page (76% vs. 69%). Thus, greater story length and jumps do not appear to be barriers to sustained reader involvement.

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[1](Version A): "As you know, sometimes news stories that begin on the front page are continued on an inside page or in another section. When you begin to read a story that jumps to another page or section, do you usually: turn to that page and keep reading the story; read it when you come to it as you go through the paper; or do you usually not read the rest of the story?"

II. BENEFITS OF READING THE NEWSPAPER

Reasons for Reading the Newspaper

Readers derive a variety of benefits from reading the paper, largely but not exclusively related to the news and information it provides. These have been studied under various labels, e.g., the "functions" or "uses and gratifications" of newspaper reading (or other media usage). In this study, we referred to them as "reasons" and asked readers about the personal relevance of eleven of them.[1]

More than three-fourths agree that their newspaper lets them follow up on news gotten elsewhere; provides a variety of entertaining news and features; reports on accidents, crimes, and misfortunes; helps them to form opinions; and to converse with others. Relatively few read the paper simply to pass the time or decide about things to do. And fewer than half say that they "feel isolated or out of touch" when they don't have a paper to read. Before the TV era, this reason was frequently cited as a major element in the attraction that newspapers had for its readers. (See Table 8) In general, the perceived benefits of reading the newspaper increase with age and are significantly greater for its more loyal readers. (See Table 9)

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[1](Version B) "Here are some reasons people give for reading a newspaper. Please tell me for each of them if you agree or disagree that it applies to you personally." IF AGREE: "Would you say you agree strongly, or only somewhat, that it applies to you?"

Table 8

Eleven Reasons for Reading the Newspaper

Reason	Percent of Readers Who:* Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree
The newspaper lets me follow up & learn more about things I saw or heard elsewhere	50%	39%	8%
It's entertaining to read a newspaper because of the variety of news & features	48	42	6
Accidents, crimes, & personal tragedies are all parts of life that the paper needs to make available to its readers	46	39	12
Reading a paper helps me to form opinions about the important issues of the day	41	38	17
Reading the paper helps me to talk with other people about what's happening	38	43	15
The paper helps me to decide where to shop & buy	35	36	24
Reading about candidates for office in the paper helps me decide how to vote	26	38	31
When I don't have a paper to read, I get to feel isolated or out of touch with the news	25	22	50
The paper tells me about celebrities & interesting people I like to know about	24	48	22
Reading a newspaper gives me something to do to pass the time	21	33	43
Things I read about in the newspaper help me plan my day & decide about things to do	6	22	68

*Those who did not express (dis)agreement are not shown.

Table 9

Eleven Reasons for Reading the Newspaper:
Percent in Each Group Who "Agree Strongly"

	By Reader Type		By Age						
	Frequent	Infrequent	18-24	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Follow up on news gotten elsewhere	58%	38%	44%	49%	49%	55%	42%	50%	55%
Variety of news & features	59	33	37	50	44	53	47	51	54
Accidents, crimes, & tragedies	51	39	48	47	47	40	42	53	48
Help in forming opinions	49	29	24	36	41	45	41	52	44
Conversational topics	48	23	20	37	41	40	43	36	45
Where to shop	35	36	26	34	35	36	32	39	44
How to vote	31	19	7	21	20	31	28	35	36
Feel out of touch when don't read	37	8	4	16	29	24	27	33	42
Celebrities, interesting people	28	18	26	24	25	19	23	23	30
Something to do to pass the time	24	16	20	18	17	20	18	20	33
Decide what to do, plan day	6	4	4	9	7	4	5	3	7

Interestingly, in contrast to many other attitude patterns shown by readers, the tendency to express strong agreement with six[1] of these specific reasons actually declines for those with higher socioeconomic status (income or education, not shown) and, for eight out of eleven reasons, is higher among blacks than whites. This suggests that the newspaper plays a wider range of roles in the lives of low income and black readers (as well as older readers). Some sex differences exist with respect to certain reasons, e.g., men are more likely than women to acknowledge their newspaper's help in forming opinions (45% vs. 36%), while women are more likely to endorse its help in deciding where to shop (44% vs. 26%) and in learning about celebrities (29% vs. 18%).

Reliance on the Newspaper to Keep Up with News Topics

The benefits conveyed by newspapers can also be measured by whether readers rely on the paper (as opposed to other media or information sources) to keep up with various news topics such as politics and elections or fashion and lifestyle. Readers can vary both in attempting to keep abreast of selected topics in the news and in their reliance on newspapers when doing so.[2]

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[1]"Variety of news and features," "accidents and crimes," "where to shop," "celebrities," "pass the time," and "plan my day."

[2](Version B): "Now, I'd like to ask you about some topics that show up in the news. First, take _____. Which one of these do you rely on most to keep up with _____ -- radio, newspapers, TV, magazines, talking with people, or some other means? If you don't usually try to keep up with that topic, just say so." (Topics: politics and elections; the economy; the entertainment world; events in this city or town; sports results; international affairs; health and science; and fashion and lifestyle.)

Table 10 shows the proportions of readers who say they try to keep up with each topic, and their reliance on newspapers or TV to help them do so. Hard news topics, the entertainment world, and health and science generally elicit uniformly high levels of interest. By way of contrast, both sports news and fashion and lifestyle coverage, which have more segmented appeals to men and women, show lower proportions of readers overall who try to keep up with them. Frequent newspaper readers are more likely to try to keep up with almost all news topics.

Readers' reliance on newspapers (vs. TV) to keep up with these eight topics varies considerably. But TV predominated as a source of news and information for readers on six out of eight topics. The gap is widest with respect to international news and political and election coverage. (See Table 10)

Among those who try to keep up, reliance is greatest on newspapers for their coverage of <u>local events</u> (61%). Newspapers lead TV for their fashion/lifestyle coverage as well. Typically, reliance on the newspaper increases with age, education, and city size. Not surprisingly, frequent readers are consistently almost twice as likely as infrequent readers to rely on the newspaper to keep up with all eight topics. (See Table 11)

<u>The Newspaper's Importance for Three Roles</u>

In addition to its general functions, the newspaper can help people play certain specific roles in daily life. In doing so it competes as an

Table 10

Keeping Up with the News and Reliance on Newspapers or Television for Eight News Topics

News Topics	Try To Keep Up*	Rely on More:* Newspapers	TV
Local events	95%	61%	17%
The economy	89	41	45
Sports results	75	40	46
International affairs	89	35	53
Entertainment world	83	34	46
Fashion and lifestyle**	70	32	27
Politics and elections	89	31	54
Health and science**	83	31	35

*Base: Total newspaper readers

**Magazines were relied on for fashion/lifestyle news by 29% and for health and science news by 22%.

information source with television. Three specific roles were singled out for study, and newspapers were compared with TV in each case. Readers were asked: "People play various roles in daily life -- as citizens, as consumers, as jobholders, and so on. Which of the two media -- newspapers or TV -- is more important to you: as a citizen or voter; as a consumer or shopper; in planning your leisure time?"

Table 11

Percent of Readers Who Rely on the Newspaper to Keep Up with Eight News Topics

	Local Events	Economy	Sports Results	Int'l Affairs
Total readers*	61%	41%	40%	35%
By reading frequency				
Frequent readers	74	50	50	44
Infrequent readers	43	26	25	21
By age				
18 - 24	41	28	39	35
25 - 29	50	38	23	28
30 - 34	67	36	39	27
35 - 44	65	39	38	34
45 - 54	73	52	49	46
55 - 64	69	43	51	42
65+	63	48	45	34
By sex				
Men	61	47	47	37
Women	61	35	31	33
By race				
White	63	42	40	36
Black	55	31	33	21
By education				
Not High School graduate	56	38	32	31
High School graduate	58	46	40	33
Some college	63	34	38	34
College graduate	70	43	47	42
By income				
Under $10,000	47	33	42	31
$10 - 14,999	59	46	32	22
$15 - 24,999	63	40	23	32
$25 - 39,999	68	45	42	37
$40,000+	61	38	44	41
By city size				
Non-metro area	56	34	31	25
50 - 249,999	66	37	53	24
250 - 999,999	70	44	37	38
1 million+	57	44	40	42

Table 11 (Continued)

Percent of Readers Who Rely on the Newspaper to Keep Up with Eight News Topics

	Entertainment	Fashion/ Lifestyle	Politics/ Elections	Health/ Science
Total readers*	34%	32%	31%	31%
By reading frequency				
Frequent readers	41	38	39	40
Infrequent readers	22	25	18	18
By age				
18 - 24	24	22	20	18
25 - 29	30	12	24	25
30 - 34	29	33	31	18
35 - 44	39	31	31	35
45 - 54	33	47	39	42
55 -64	40	49	34	34
65+	37	46	35	43
By sex				
Men	37	34	36	30
Women	31	32	26	33
By race				
White	35	33	32	33
Black	26	28	21	22
By education				
Not High School graduate	22	39	23	27
High School graduate	31	29	28	33
Some college	35	31	28	31
College graduate	45	34	46	31
By income				
Under $10,000	19	28	27	29
$10 - 14,999	24	24	15	28
$15 - 24,999	32	32	25	28
$25 - 39,999	43	43	32	32
$40,000+	37	30	39	28
By city size				
Non-metro area	21	22	18	24
50 - 249,999	29	26	32	30
250 - 999,999	37	39	31	32
1 million+	39	35	37	34

*Who try to keep up with topic.

The newspaper emerges as far more important than TV in helping people in their role as consumers or shoppers (65% vs. 15%). It holds an advantage over TV (42% vs. 23%) in helping people plan their leisure time activities as well. But it is slightly behind TV (33% vs. 36%) in helping people play the role of citizen or voter. In the latter case, one-quarter (26%) acknowledge their reliance on both as sources of political information. (See Table 12)

Table 12

Readers' Assessment of the Relative Importance of Newspapers and TV for Three Social Roles

	Newspapers More Important	TV More Important	Both Equal	Don't Know
As consumer or shopper	65%	15%	12%	5%
In planning leisure time	42	23	16	16
As citizen or voter	33	36	26	3

Reliance on newspapers by consumers is greatest among older readers, the better educated, and especially among women. Leisure time reliance upon newspapers is relatively greater among the better educated and higher income readers, a pattern that holds as well for playing the role of citizens and voters. And, in line with many earlier findings, newspapers are a relatively more important source of information for frequent readers with respect to all three of these roles. (See Table 13)

Table 13

Percent of Readers Saying Newspapers are More Important than TV in Their Performance of Three Social Roles

	As Consumer/ Shopper	In Planning Leisure Time	As Citizen/ Voter
Total readers	65%	42%	33%
By reading frequency			
Frequent readers	74%	51%	43%
Infrequent readers	53	30	19
By age			
18 - 24	46%	46%	28%
25 - 29	56	36	29
30 - 34	67	37	23
35 - 44	67	48	30
45 - 54	69	36	36
55 - 64	73	47	42
65+	73	38	39
By sex			
Men	57%	42%	31%
Women	72	42	35
By race			
White	67%	45%	36%
Black	53	32	19
By education			
Not High School graduate	63%	28%	26%
High School graduate	60	40	27
Some college	67	43	43
College graduate	72	58	41
By income			
Under $10,000	56%	28%	30%
$10 - 14,999	68	38	35
$15 - 24,999	69	37	26
$25 - 39,999	73	51	40
$40,000+	70	53	38

The Problem of Time Pressure

Despite the many potential benefits offered by the newspaper, time pressures can erode people's motivations to buy and read it. This has become increasingly evident in studies that find growing numbers citing "no time to read" as reasons for reducing their reading frequency or stopping subscriptions. We began this study by asking respondents "Some people feel that on most days they never have enough time to do all the things they want to do, some feel they have too much time on their hands, and others find that time is not a problem." When asked which of the three options was closest to their own feelings, 58% admitted to feeling under time pressure, one-third (33%) said time wasn't a problem, and only 4% had too much time on their hands. (See Table 14)

It is easy to identify social factors that contribute to the feeling of being pressured. Working women (76%), the employed (71%), adults in households with young children (69%), and those in the child-rearing and career-mobile ages of 30-44 (74%) were all well above average in admitting to leading pressured lives. As one might expect, the better educated and those earning more were also above average in this respect. But differences between frequent and infrequent readers in feeling time pressures were not sizable (56% vs. 63%), and those who don't read newspapers were actually below average (52%).

Hence, while time pressures clearly affect substantial segments of the adult population in ways that can and do affect newspaper readership,

Table 14

Respondents' Feelings About Daily Time Pressures

	Not Enough Time	Too Much Time	Time Is Not A Problem
Total respondents	58%	4%	33%
By reading frequency			
Frequent readers	56%	5%	35%
Infrequent readers	63	4	28
Newspaper nonreaders	52	5	37
By age			
18 - 24	54%	9%	30%
25 - 29	66	3	29
30 - 34	77	2	18
35 - 44	71	2	22
45 - 54	66	3	24
55 - 64	48	5	42
65+	27	7	61
By sex			
Men	54%	5%	36%
Women	61	4	30
By race			
White	59%	5%	32%
Black	53	4	40
By education			
Not High School graduate	41%	6%	47%
High School graduate	60	5	31
Some college	68	4	24
College graduate	64	3	28
By income			
Under $10,000	42%	8%	43%
$10 - 14,999	54	8	35
$15 - 24,999	61	6	31
$25 - 39,999	68	2	27
$40,000+	67	3	24
Households with a child	69%	3%	23%
Employed persons	71%	2%	22%
Working women	76%	2%	17%

other factors (e.g., the use of competing news media, especially TV, and less interest in news) separately and in conjunction with a perceived time bind clearly play explanatory roles. Many of the groups cited above as claiming to feel more pressed for time -- the better educated, the more affluent -- are among the newspaper's most loyal and intense readers. In general, the busiest people are also among the best newspaper readers.

III. READERS' EDITORIAL CONTENT PREFERENCES

News or Features?

The issue of striking a balance between news and features in the mix of editorial content is a perennial one in readership research. In this study, as in earlier ones, we used two measures to gauge readers' preferences. Half of the readers were asked to choose between a hypothetical newspaper that was "mostly news" and one that was "mostly entertaining features." The other half were asked which element, news or features, they "look forward" to reading more. The results of both questions show a preference for news, but with substantial minorities in all demographic groups choosing features over news. (See Table 15)

More readers opted for a paper that was mostly news (50%) or volunteered their preference for one with a balance between news and features (22%) than chose a hypothetical newspaper with "mostly entertaining features" (21%). These proportions are virtually identical with those found in our 1982 national study, suggesting great stability in the attitudes and preferences that readers bring to the daily paper.[1] Age plays a significant role: the youngest group is the only one that favored features over news, and the preference for news grows steadily stronger with increasing age. Men, the better educated, and frequent readers were all substantially more likely to prefer a news-dominated paper.

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[1] See Readers Rate Their Daily Newspaper: Measuring Images and Performance (Newspaper Advertising Bureau, 1986), pp. 1-3.

Table 15

Readers' Preferences for News or Features

	Want Newspaper With:			Look Forward More to:**	
	Mostly News	Mostly Features	A Balance*	News	Features
Total readers	50%	21%	22%	46%	40%
By reading frequency					
Frequent readers	58%	14%	23%	47%	43%
Infrequent readers	40	29	20	44	37
By age					
18 - 24	25%	49%	24%	44%	41%
25 - 29	39	26	30	35	51
30 - 34	47	26	17	53	37
35 - 44	59	14	21	52	37
45 - 54	54	14	23	45	40
55 - 64	62	9	22	39	47
65+	63	10	19	51	34
By sex					
Men	61%	14%	19%	54%	34%
Women	41	26	25	39	46
By education					
Not High School graduate	50%	17%	22%	38%	42%
High School graduate	47	22	23	43	41
Some college	46	31	20	45	42
College graduate	63	11	23	58	37
By city size					
Non-metro area	55%	23%	15%	48%	39%
50 - 249,999	55	24	15	53	42
250 - 999,999	52	19	23	44	42
1 million+	45	19	28	44	40

*Volunteered
**Combines answers of "much more" and "somewhat more" for news or features.

(Version A): "Suppose that there were two daily newspapers around here: one that was mostly news with some features, and the other that was mostly entertaining features with a summary of news. Which newspaper would you personally prefer?"

(Version B): "...Which one of these statements comes closest to describing your own feelings?" I look forward: much more to reading the regular features;... somewhat more to reading the regular features;... somewhat more to reading the news items;... much more to reading the news items.

Similar results were obtained in response to the other question, though the anticipations that readers show do not tilt as clearly in the direction of preferring news content over features. News was preferred to features by 46% vs. 40%. Demographic differences were also much less pronounced, although younger readers remain relatively more favorably oriented toward features. As with the results on the other news preference item, these proportions are closely comparable to the ones found in our 1982 study, although the trend inclines toward a choice of features in both instances.

More Short Items or More In-Depth Ones?

Given their general preference for news, how would readers like to see the newshole filled -- with more short news stories or with in-depth coverage of important stories? Neither option commands majority support: in-depth coverage was preferred by 46%, vs. 39% choosing more short items. Women were more even-handed in their choices than men in this regard, and blacks showed a significantly greater preference for in-depth coverage rather than more news briefs. But the choice among alternatives showed neither systematic nor sharp differences across demographic groups. The lack of differentiation in readers' responses to this question suggests that this issue is not one that can be studied simply as a general attitude or preference. Offering readers concrete choices among specific examples, perhaps using prototype or actual news stories, is likely to yield a more realistic profile of preferences.

How is Local News Defined?

The newspaper's reputation is strongly affected by how it performs as a vehicle for local news, the category that usually comes out first or near the top in readers' affections in most readership studies. But how is "local news" defined, especially in sprawling or fast-growing metropolitan areas? Do readers' definitions match those adopted in most newsrooms?

In this study, readers were asked to define the concept of local news in several ways, first in their own words and then in relation to different geographical units. Phrases such as "my neighborhood or community," "my town or city" or references to their city and its surrounding area clearly predominated in their own expressed views. More than two-thirds (70%) used such "close-in" phrases to define what they meant by "local news." And most readers were emphatic in using geographic descriptions as part of their own definitions. Only 13% gave examples of certain types of stories rather than geographic settings as a way of defining local news, and only 7% weren't able to supply a definition. Their volunteered responses suggest that it is the most familiar sense of place, the locales within which they live, work, and shop, that chiefly defines the scope of most people's definitions of local news.

When they were subsequently offered a set of geographical categories as definers of local news and asked to choose among them, therefore, it is

not surprising that the resulting alignments of opinion reflected this close-in perspective. "Local news" seems to fit under geographic terms that fall in concentric circles, radiating outward from one's neighborhood. Most (90+%) readers accepted both neighborhood or city-based events as belonging under the heading of local news. A smaller proportion, but still a majority (73%), felt the region or metro area was an appropriate defining term. But only 34% accepted "things that happen in this state" as local news. Readers living in all regions of the country and in cities of all sizes were similar in this regard.

The close-in perspective reflected in these results was relaxed somewhat when the readers were asked which one of these geographical areas best captures the sense of local news. When forced to restrict their choice, a larger number of readers accepted a wider horizon for the concept. While city or town events were the focus of 45%, another 30% chose the region or metro area as the best definer of local news, and 7% chose a statewide frame of reference. (See Table 16) As might be expected, the better educated and higher income readers were more likely to adopt wider orbits as the one best definer of local news, presumably reflecting their more cosmopolitan interests. Readers in the least populated or major metro areas were more restrictive than others in their local news definitions. But on the whole, there is little basis in this set of results for the belief that the notion of local news is defined by most readers either in the same way or narrowly as neighborhood ("chicken dinner") news.

Table 16

Readers' Choice of One Best Definition of "Local" News

	Events or Happenings in this:			
	Neighborhood	City/Town	Region/Metro Area	State
Total readers	19%	45%	30%	7%
By reading frequency				
Frequent readers	17%	43%	33%	6%
Infrequent readers	20	47	25	7
By sex				
Men	21%	39%	33%	7%
Women	16	51	27	6
By race				
White	18%	44%	32%	6%
Black	18	48	19	15
By education				
Not High School graduate	26%	38%	30%	6%
High School graduate	22	49	21	8
Some college	14	50	31	6
College graduate	10	38	46	6
By income				
Under $10,000	28%	38%	25%	8%
$10 - 14,999	14	49	29	8
$15 - 24,999	19	49	27	5
$25 - 39,999	13	44	36	8
$40,000+	15	47	32	6
By metro area				
Non metro area	20%	49%	25%	6%
50 - 249,999	11	39	47	3
250 - 999,999	11	47	33	9
1 million+	26	43	24	7

Question (Version A):

"Please tell me for each of the following whether or not you feel it belongs under the heading of "local news." Events in this neighborhood; things that happen in (CITY/TOWN); events in this region or metro area; things that happen in this state. THEN: "Which one is the best definition of local news?"

APPENDIX

Respondent Bases*

	Newspaper Readers	Total Version A Readers	Total Version B Readers
Total sample (unweighted)	1,717	843	874
By sex			
Total men	703	340	363
Total women	1,014	503	511
By age			
18 - 24 years	150	74	76
25 - 34 years	370	164	206
35 - 44 years	359	174	185
45 - 54 years	236	112	124
55 - 64 years	232	121	111
65 years or older	370	198	172
By education			
Some high school or less	376	186	188
High school graduate	629	307	321
1 - 3 years college	361	170	188
College graduate	330	161	168
By household income			
Under $15,000	443	214	229
$15,000 - $24,999	340	169	171
$25,000 - $39,999	312	156	156
$40,000 and over	318	140	178
By frequency of daily reading			
Read 4 - 5 days	987	476	511
Read 3 days or fewer	730	367	363
By circulation of newspaper read			
Under 25,000	262	125	137
25,000 - 50,000	316	160	156
50,000 - 100,000	198	100	98
100,000 - 250,000	454	215	239
250,000 and over	407	201	206

*Numbers are for unweighted respondents; all percentages are based on weighted numbers of respondents.